

Tortured logic: A blot on the United States

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Though President Bush has repeatedly maintained that the U.S. does not engage in torture, his administration continues to equivocate. It has insisted that terrorists need not be treated like ordinary combatants. It has admitted to practicing waterboarding (simulated drowning) and refuses to rule out that inhumane practice despite the objection of most legal experts, civilian and military.

Last month the president vetoed a bill that would have required the CIA to limit itself to the interrogation methods listed in the army field manual. That manual outlaws techniques such as waterboarding, electric shock, beatings and mock executions, and focuses mainly on psychological strategies. Bush insists that the CIA needs more “specialized interrogation methods” to extract information from the most dangerous terrorists. He also claims that terrorist attacks have been averted by use of these specialized methods. Bush won’t reveal what those methods are because, he says, that would give an advantage to the enemy. We just have to take the president’s word that the methods are “safe and lawful.”

Taking the president’s word on this is impossible to do. It’s impossible to trust leaders whose complacency on treatment of prisoners made possible the abuses at Abu Ghraib. And it is deeply troubling that officials continue to invoke the misleading scenario of the “ticking time bomb” to justify coercive physical interrogation. The threat and use of severe physical pain is just as likely to produce false information as accurate information—which is why courts exclude testimony that has been coerced.

Darius Rejali, author of *Torture and Democracy*, who has examined the use of torture in places like Chile and Iran, points out that when torture is condoned by one sector of the government the practice inevitably migrates to other sectors of society. Ordinary police officers begin to think: why engage in the hard work of an investigation if we can do what the elite forces do—use force to get results. The use

of torture by any agency demoralizes those who practice it and eventually corrupts all law enforcement agencies.

Years after being tortured at the hands of the Nazis, Austrian essayist Jean Améry summarized the moral transgression he experienced: “A slight pressure by the tool-wielding hand is enough to turn the other—along with his head, in which are perhaps stored Kant and Hegel, and all nine symphonies, and *The World as Will and Representation*—into a shrill squealing piglet at slaughter.” Torture is a deliberate act of negating its subjects and what makes them who they are—their unique consciousness and their ability to think and choose. This is why torture is an unacceptable violation of human dignity and why anything less than a complete repudiation of the practice is a blot on the United States.